CRENSHAW
Wellness
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Hassan Rahim (HR)

Hassan Rahim is a graphic designer from Los Angeles, currently based in New York. His work with clients ranging from Nike to Nine Inch Nails feels both thrilling and rigorous, full of texture and detail that place them from either an underground past or far off acid-laced future. For Rahim, texture tells so much of the story, giving a design its history, whether real or fabricated. For example, in 2018 Rahim collaborated with the Crenshaw streetwear brand Total Luxury Spa for a Sun Ra bootleg from an imagined concert at the LA Coliseum. The shirt exploded online, the idea of the fictional concert connecting followers of the band and streetwear hypebeasts alike. It's a powerful example of how a bootleg might surpass its role as a simple garment and become a bridge between histories, cultures, and communities. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

BS: To begin, I want to pull a quote from a previous interview of yours where you mention two signatures of your work are "inversion" and "subversion." I think you could make the argument that these ideas are very much at the core of bootlegging.

> Could you speak about your relationship to bootlegging and the influence it has had on your practice?

HR: I think about bootlegging and sampling in relation to each other, similar but different. A bootleg is something that's attempting to emulate or riff off of an original idea, and then market itself as a version of that idea to a customer who may or may not be able to tell the difference. An early example of that from my youth was going to a sports game and seeing people sell T-shirts in the parking lot for cheaper than the official merch store. I would ask my dad about them and he told me they were bootlegs and we shouldn't buy them, but to me they looked so much more interesting.

Sampling, to me, involves a certain degree of authorship. In the process of copying you create something new from preexisting material. I think about the first hip-hop record which was just looping a funk song, but at a certain point, that loop becomes its own thing. This gray area between the thing that's being sampled and this new creation is the place that I like to explore in my work.

> BS: That's interesting because in a lot of ways I see your work as a designer similar to a music producer or maybe a DJ. The way you pull together pre-existing elements, manipulate them, combine them, until you create something that feels fully your own.

HR: It's funny, so much of how I got into design is a result of bootlegging—or pirating software. I down-

loaded music production software and I downloaded Photoshop, and I happened to be better at design. My approach is a result of the way I needed to teach myself how to design. Growing up I was living in a group home, my parents couldn't provide for me, I just needed to stay out of trouble. I think from that situation there is a certain amount of resourcefulness and resilience that develops. Going back to the idea of the DJ looping the record, it was a degree of necessity, using what you had at your disposal. And that's how I got started—always sampling, making use of what was around.

> BS: I've been thinking a lot about bootlegging as a form of learning. In Shanzhai culture, if you create a believable copy you become as respected as the original author.

It reminds of something Kanye said (sorry to mention his name) when he was learning to produce. He just tried to recreate this Dr. Dre song sound for sound, an exact copy. And he really learned the nuances of production from doing this. For me, I didn't go to school, I learned from watching online tutorials where you would be given a project file that you had to recreate. They are teaching you how to use the tools, but then you have to develop the way you think, your approach with the tools. Someone can teach you how to use a hammer, then you can decide to hit a nail or bash in a window. I think the issue with that approach comes when people don't develop their own way of thinking... they can't break out of copying.

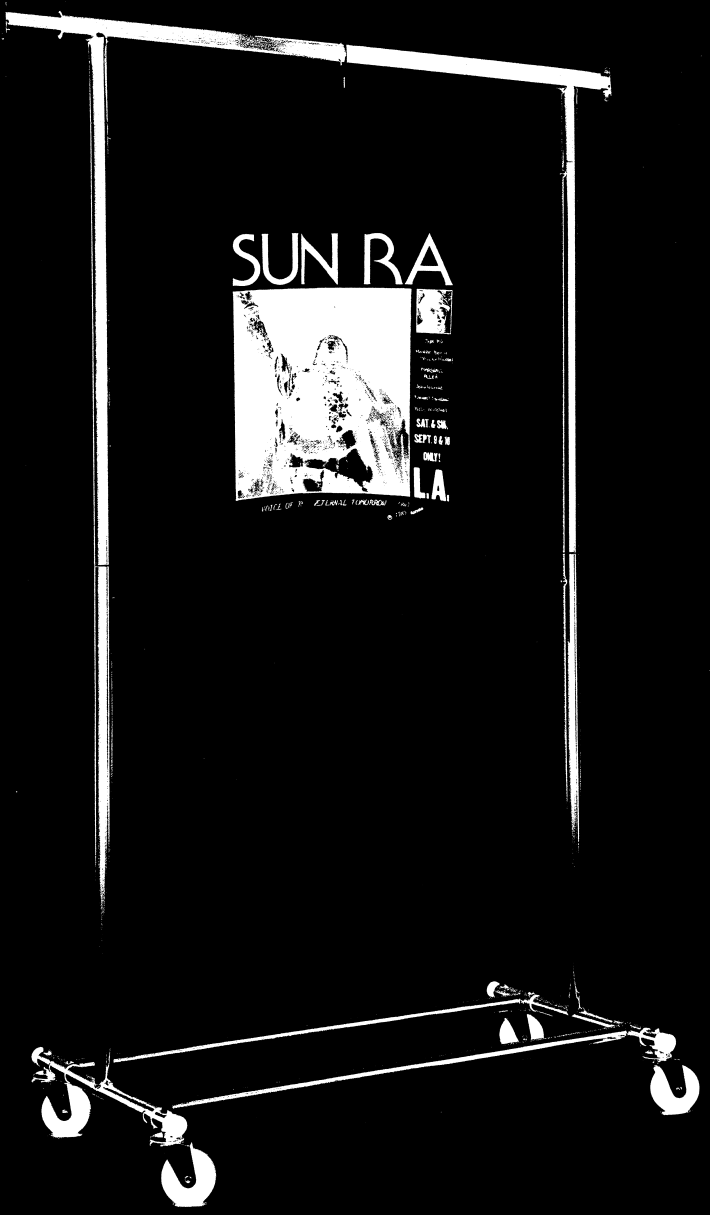
> BS: I want to ask you about your Sun Ra bootleg. Throughout this research, I've been

really interested in the idea that a bootleg can allow us to get closer to a subject than the source. Perhaps it has something to do with perspective, or seeing something through the eyes of someone who loved that thing. Or maybe it's about the process of making. Did making your Sun Ra T-shirt bring you closer to that moment in time and to the work of Sun Ra?

HR: Totally, a lot opened up for us with that shirt. Initially, I didn't think anyone would see it, I thought it was gonna be just for the heads. The idea of our shirt was to make an imaginary concert tee as if they were going to perform at the LA Coliseum. We made two colorways for Total Luxury Spa and it sold out immediately. This all felt a little before the new wave of bootleg band T-shirts on the internet. We ended up doing a second print run and realized that this money had to go to the band, and we were able to make a generous donation and it really opened up this dialog with the members of the group. I think that's an important consideration with bootlegging, whether you're affecting someone's bottom line or taking money away from people that really need it. The shirt eventually allowed us to do some merch for the band in conjunction with a livestreamed concert during the pandemic, with all proceeds going to Sun Ra Arkestra and World Stage. It was this really beautiful collaboration that all started with a bootleg shirt.

BS: Throughout your practice, and in this particular example, runs this throughline of

p. 413: Hassan Rahim, Total Luxury Spa, Sun Ra T-Shirt (2018)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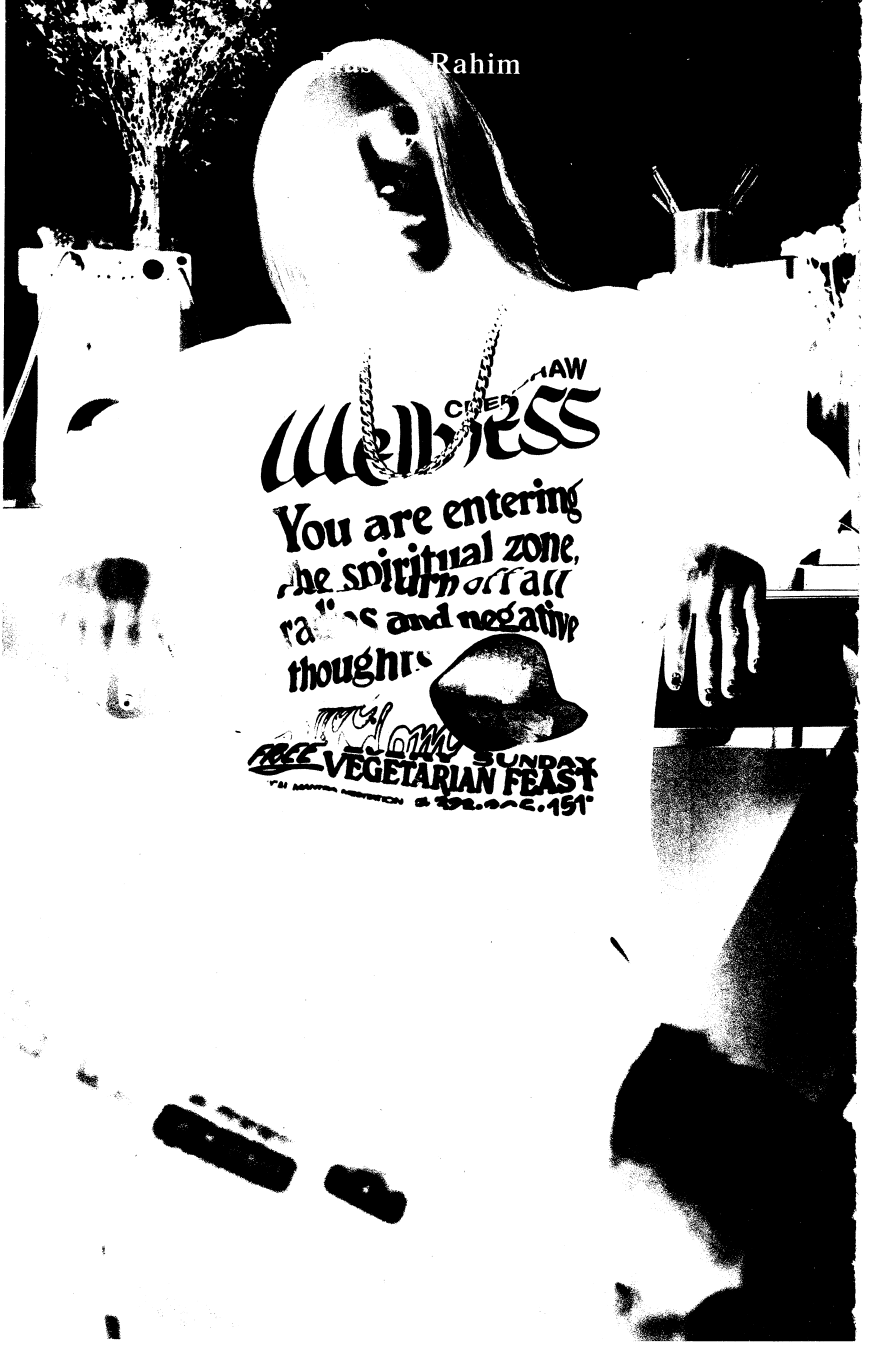
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You are entering
the spiritual zone,
and negative
thoughts
SUNDAY
VEGETARIAN FEAST

fandom. I'm wondering if you can speak to how that drives what you make.

HR: There's a lot of ego in this industry and people are too cool to be obsessed with something. It just comes off as so ingenuine. I love the idea of being a fan. And it's a whole other level of fandom to then want to make something to honor this thing, like we did with the Sun Ra Arkestra. You have to really care about something to push it to that degree of homage. Think about the time when fanzines were being produced and bands had mailing lists—what an amazing culture. It was like the epitome of fandom and even bootlegging. Look at the Grateful Dead, it's all just bootlegs of bootlegs, I'm not sure if there ever really was an original.

BS: The Grateful Dead makes me think about the relationship between bootlegging and community (fan communities, maker communities, et cetera). The Los Angeles-based clothing store Total Luxury Spa seems to tap into this idea, specifically with the Crenshaw community of LA, in a unique way. From this project, have you learned anything about bootlegging as a means of creating and preserving communities?

HR: I absolutely see bootlegs as markers of communities. I think about skating as a kid, and how particular brands of skate gear really established who you were connected to. And of course that's carried over

p. 414: Hassan Rahim, Total Luxury Spa, Crenshaw Wellness T-Shirt (2017)

into streetwear and trends with graphic T-shirts. So by wearing these, or wearing some obscure bootleg shirt, you immediately find your people. Again, with the Sun Ra shirt, I was fascinated by the people who bought them. Some were fans of the band, others just liked the aesthetic and the shirt became a way for them to learn about the group. I saw a resurgence of interest in Sun Ra after we made that shirt and I realized how much power a simple bootleg shirt could have. It connected old and new fans across all generations without the gatekeeping that can sometimes happen with niche communities. Since that shirt, I've wanted to use bootlegs as a way to open people up to lesser known bands who influenced hip hop—bands like ESG, who are a gateway to a whole genre of music, a community, a certain place and time.

> BS: Given the way you embrace bootlegging, what are your thoughts around ideas of authorship and originality? Especially as someone whose work has been very influential and highly referenced by a younger generation of designers.

HR: I'm less concerned with originality, I think what needs to change is this desire to call people out. At this point, I'm tired of the drama and tea of things like Diet Prada. I'm more interested in putting my references on display rather than trying to keep them for myself. That way the people who are really interested will dig deeper—who's the designer? What else did they design? Who were they influenced by, what movement were they a part of? You allow people to find their own way into a particular subject matter.

I've really come around to this idea of open source. At first I was very protective, but I think that stemmed from insecurity and ego. I came to realize we all have the same tools, the only thing I can really claim as my own is my process, the way I think about things. I'm less concerned with some sort of aesthetic signature, I'm aiming more for a signature approach which feels very tied to the idea of subversion you mentioned earlier. The filters and effects and textures that I use, which might seem like my style, actually come from a very particular way of approaching material. It's not something you can just apply to every project. Someone once told me that I owned "inversion" and I laughed. How self-centered would that be, to think you invented a negative image? When you get over this idea of originality, you can put that effort into building a community with like-minded interest. Coming from punk and indie cultures, no one was really trying to one up each other, you were just trying to find your people.

BS: How do you feel about graphic design's latest obsession with bootlegging?

HR: What I see as the main difference between bootlegs today and in the past is the availability of resources. Look, for example, at a 1990s rap T-shirt. You often find some odd system font, the colors are slightly off and misregistered, images are clumsily cut-out. That wasn't by design, it was out of necessity. You know, they can only afford a certain amount of colors, so they had to make do, and these limitations created a really interesting effect.

I think a lot of this "bootleg look" today comes down to texture. Texture really tells a story, it talks

about where something comes from, it gives something a history. When I use textures, it isn't random, it's still about communicating something. And in order to understand textures you have to understand the techniques and limitations that produce them. I have people reaching out all the time asking for me to give them my textures, thinking they can just apply them to any design. There's even a marketplace where you can buy textures and effects to make things look old or worn... it feels like a new form of skeuomorphism. One time someone asked me for a certain halftone texture and I just DM'd him a link to a specific Xerox Phaser printer. I wasn't trying to be protective, it was just an attempt to encourage research and really promote the techniques that produce these visual results.

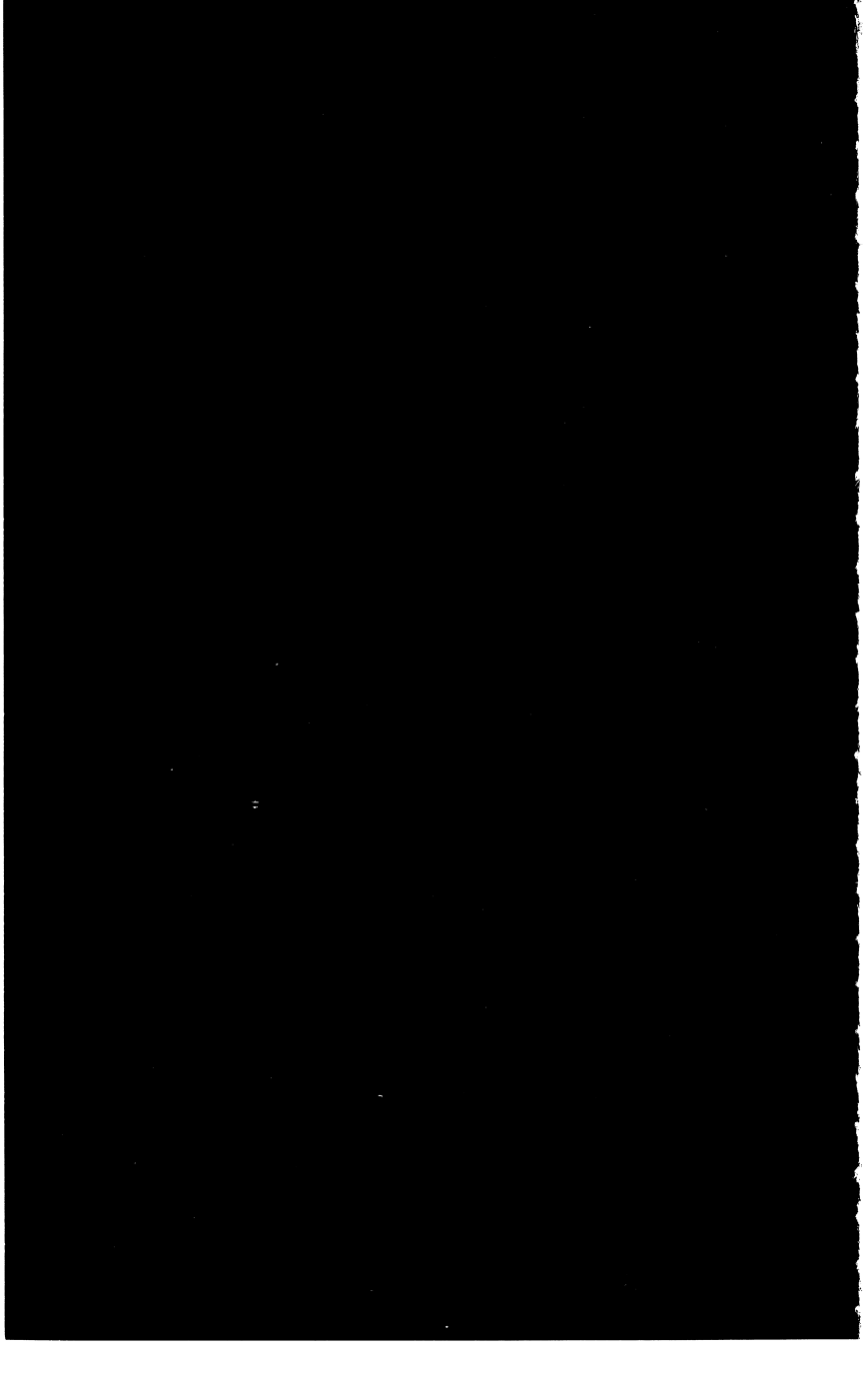
I'm reminded of an interview I saw with Timbaland. He had gotten to a point where he had every keyboard, synth, plugin, and rack that you could buy. But to challenge himself to make something different he realized he needed to change his approach. For the Nelly Furtado record he ended up just using trash cans, pots, and pans. They were sounds you couldn't emulate with new technology, he had to go back to the source.

> BS: As we look at contemporary bootlegs, it's interesting to ask why this "textured" look is so alluring. I wonder if it has something to do with nostalgia or the way we equate things from the past with a certain sense of authenticity?

HR: Time is the texture in most scenarios. However, a lot of the newer generation, especially those on In-

stagram, or post-Tumblr, seem to rely heavily on texture. I think the texture gives otherwise cold vector graphics a sense of character. Perhaps it's a slight rebellion to the digitality of our world. In the 2000s everything was slick, hyper-3D, a vision of the future. Now we seem much more interested in trying to create a sense of the past.

> BS: A lot of what you are saying with these effect marketplaces taps into my concern that today there are designers trying to replicate a "bootleg look" despite having an abundance of resources, techniques, and forms of distribution at their disposal. It reduces bootlegging to an aesthetic.

HR: I'm reminded of a conversation I was having with someone asking if punk was dead, because punk used to be a community, a scene, a way of life. Today, punk has gotten distilled into an aesthetic or a style. I think that it's the same issue, it's the gentrification of an aesthetic. To me, bootlegging isn't dead. I think bootlegging is evolving into more of a way of thinking and at the end of the day, it's always a means of honoring something or showing love. Even today you can tell when these projects are starting from a place of true fandom rather than superficially tapping into a trend. Despite everything, I think that one of the most genuine ways to signal a love of something is to wear it on your back.

Title page (p. 408): Logo from the Crenshaw Wellness T-Shirt (2017) by Hassan Rahim and Total Luxury Spa